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TV Update

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Reporters Expect To Win Battle over News Crackdown

Washington—President Ronald Reagan thinks that news leaks are a "problem of major proportion," so he has ordered a crackdown on Government employees who give inside information to reporters. CBS White House correspondent Bill Plante thinks news leaks "are wonderful. I hope they continue." And despite the Administration's current attempts to stop the leaking of information (by such means as authorizing lie detector tests for officials suspected of slipping classified material to the media), most journalists expect to win the battle.

CBS Pentagon correspondent Ike Pappas says, "You can feel a chill on the place." But Pappas adds that pressure has not deterred some of his sources from talking to him. "They know that even with the full-court press they'll be all right—I won't let a story get back to bite them." ABC correspondent David Ensor says, "Some of my sources are telling me, 'I'm not going to talk to you for a while.' But it's only temporary."

NBC White House correspondent John Palmer says, "If this thing lasts it's going to make the job a lot more difficult. But I have my doubts how effective the restrictions will be."

The directives Palmer is talking about were issued Jan. 12. Under them, before Government officials can meet with reporters, they must inform the White House about the proposed interview and receive clearance. The Administration has emphasized that only interviews dealing with classified information are subject to such advance approval. But as most of the information the media receives about

Poland, Russia, defense issues or the military can be called classified, journalists are worried that political decisions could be hidden behind a "secret" stamp.

On the other hand, they are optimistic about always being able to find someone to talk to. NBC's Palmer says, "The natural instinct of the politicians, administrators and bureaucrats in Washington has always been to leak."

Former NBC newsmen and Presidential press secretary Ron Nessen agrees: "My experience, both as a 'leaker' and a 'leakee,' shows that leaks are done for political reasons. It could be turf-grabbing, it could be to build public support for or opposition to a decision. Those things aren't going to stop."

Still, at least one White House correspondent thinks the press may be in for "a long struggle." ABC's Sam Donaldson says, "The President may make jokes about news leaks, but he's deadly earnest about stopping them. Of course, his plan will never work."

"About the only thing that'll change," says NBC's Palmer, "is that those sources with whom you've built up a lot of credibility over the years—those sources are still going to talk to you. Except they're going to want to meet in less-public restaurants than they did before." —John Weisman